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Colored Cemetery (Little Africa) in Fort Erie, Canada

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COLOURED CEMETERY

The Coloured Cemetery is situated on Curtis Road about 500 feet from Ridgemount Rd., one block from St. John's Anglican church and cemetery.

This cemetery is known under different names depending who you are talking to: Coloured Cemetery, Rose Cemetery, Dennahower Cemetery, The Little Cemetery Around The Corner, or Curtis Road Cemetery.

In Thomas B. Wilson's report "Inscriptions from "THE LITTLE CEMETERY AROUND THE CORNER"

"A considerable number of enquiries were made to ascertain the name and origin of this little cemetery in Bertie Township, Welland County, but they failed to yield the desired information. The cemetery is just around the corner from St. John's Anglican Church ("St. John's Ridgemount") which has its own burial ground.

One respondent reported that the cemetery was known to some as a Coloured cemetery, a place where Negroes were buried." (1)

We know by the 1851 Canada Census that a number of Colored people were living in the area. In 1851 and again in the 1861 Census there was a special column where the enumerator noted if the person was Colored, Mulatto or Indian.

History is not always in writing and for this cemetery we rely on folklore.

Mrs. Audrey Miller Laurie who traces her line to Andrew Miller wrote an article in 1975:

"THE LITTLE AFRICA"

"On the side of the trail opposite St. John's Church there is a negro cemetery called Dunahower and supposedly the remains of "Little Africa" which was entirely populated by Negro Slaves who came to Canada by the Underground Route from the south, popularized many years ago in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin".

This village flourished between 1840 to 1875 but after that date, the population dwindled and drifted to other parts of southern and western Ontario where their descendants are found today. At the time the area was rich in black walnut, white oak, maple, ash



and hickory.

The 200 odd residents labored to cut logs by the thousands, most of which were rafted across the Niagara River and re-shipped from Tonawanda to eastern United States centres. The place was quite prosperous and had its own neighborhood stores and Church."(2)

Because of many sunken graves with no markers and no records available it is impossible to say who are buried there. There are only two tombstones of a family identified as Colored in the 1861 Census that is the Benjamin RUSSELL's family. There is one more recent tombstone with the name BRIGHT. One of the BRIGHT'S family was known as Colored people. The other names found in this cemetery are Anger, Jansen, Cregar, Stevens, Huffman and Scarlett, English or German surnames and the persons with the same surname in the 1851 & 1861 Census were not listed as Colored.

The Town of Fort Erie has been responsible for the maintenance of this family cemetery since April 14, 1975 (By-Law 468-75). In the summer of 1985 the Fort Erie Cemetery Board had a sign installed in every cemetery under the Town jurisdiction including this one.

On January 5, 1988 Michael Kompf wrote a letter to the Times-Review in an attempt to draw attention to the inappropriate naming of the Coloured cemetery located on Curtis Road near Ridgemount Road. This letter was brought to the Cemetery Board's attention and more research was done through old church records, Funeral Home Records and Land Registry Office records to determine when the name "Coloured" began.

Although some people may be offended by the term Coloured, records which go back more than one hundred years indicate that the term was used in the Canada Census in both 1851 and 1861 and in St. Paul's Anglican Church Burial Records as recently as 1928. Funeral Home records also show that the word colored was used to identify people of African origin. I was unable to find in writing the name COLOURED Cemetery as a burial place in the records I searched through.

I would like to share some of my findings regarding the portion of land that we are interested in, which is Lot 10 Con 7th Niagara River.

May 6, 1796: John House received from the Crown:
400 Acres Lots 9, 10, 11, & 12 - 7th Con.

April 2, 1821: Benjamin Hardison bought 196 Acres
S.W. pts of Lots No 9, 10 & 11 in 7th Con.

May 31, 1823: Benjamin Hardison devised to his 2nd son

George Hardison & his Heirs and assigns
for ever
196 Acres W pt of Lots 9, 10, 11 - 7th Con.

Feb. 15, 1833: George Hardison sold to Samuel Street
196 Acres W pt of Lots 9, 10, 11 - 7th Con.

Feb. 10, 1841: Samuel Street and wife sold to Hugh Rose
196 Acres w pt of Lots 9, 10, 11 - 7th Con.

Feb. 24, 1845: Hugh Rose devised to his son Adam B. Rose
his heirs and assigns
196 Acres W pt Lots 9, 10, 11 - 7th Con.

Jan. 7, 1846: Adam B. Rose devised to his brothers
Daniel & Alexander Rose
and his nephews Hugh A. Rose & Hugh McKerlie
W parts Lots 9, 10, 11 - 7th Con.
equally divided among them after his mother's
death.
"...also he willed that one fourth of an acre
of ground in which his father is buried be
occupied as a family burying ground and that
it be substantially fenced in within six
months after his decease..."

Many other transactions took place, and

April 20, 1864: Hugh A. Rose sold to John Dennahower
85 Acres pt Lots 9, 10, 11 - 7th Con.

The oldest tombstone is engraved John C. Anger who died 27 Feb.
1813. The Angers were living on Lot 8, 9, 10, 11 in the 8th
Con. Charles was the oldest son of Frederick Anger, Christiana
daughter of Frederick Anger was married to John House. The
Angers were neighbors of John House i.e. Lots 9, 10, 11 & 12 -
7th Con.

After much consideration the Cemetery Board felt that it was
appropriate to keep the name COLOURED as well as the other
names by which this cemetery is known. The plaque which has
been installed thus reflects the history related to this
cemetery.

Denise d'Entremont, Researcher in Cemetery History
June 1992

(1) The Ontario Register Vol 4, 1971 No 3.

(2) Audrey Miller Laurie
Salt Box Studies 1/8/75

Some who lived at Bertie Hill became known and respected. Perhaps the best known was Betsy Robinson, or "Aunt Betsy" who arrived in Fort Erie after escaping slavery in Virginia. John Bright was said to be the drummer boy at the Battle of Lundy's Lane.

Little Africa

Little Africa was located east of Stevensville, stretching from Ridgemount Road to the former Miller's Bay Shipyard (now the Niagara Parks Commission Marina).² It was spread out along the eastern part of the Sunset Indian Trail, which is now Curtis Road and Miller Avenue.³ "The place was quite prosperous and had its own neighbourhood stores and church." All that remains of Little Africa is the Coloured Cemetery on Curtis Road, just east of Ridgemount Road.⁴

In 1840, the population of the community was about 80, but before 1880 it peaked at about 200.⁵ These "early Black residents often worked at cutting logs to be rafted across the Niagara River for shipment to American centres."⁶ "At the time, the area was rich in black walnut, white oak, maple, ash and hickory."⁷ "In 1860, a railroad line (Erie and Niagara Railroad) was run from Fort Erie to Niagara-on-the-Lake, through the heart of 'Little Africa' where wood-choppers prepared fuel for the engines. Blacks cut wood for the Canada Southern Railway (which was built in 1873) and for the ferries which carried trains across the Niagara River at Fort Erie before the International Railway Bridge was built."⁸ Around 1880, the population of Little Africa began to scatter to other parts of the province because of the decreasing wood supply and an increased use of coal.⁹

Coloured Cemetery

The Coloured Cemetery is located in what was Little Africa on the north side of Curtis Road just east of Ridgemount Road. The exact number of blacks buried in the cemetery among the 46 headstones remains a mystery. Only the Russell family's four children and their mother are confirmed (by census records) to be black.¹⁰ Another suspected black family in the cemetery are two people with the name Bright. The Brights were a well-known black family in the community, and Charles Bright maintained that a lot of...[his] friends and relatives are buried . . . [in unmarked graves in the] . . . dirty corner."¹¹ Local historians believe that blacks may have been buried in this cemetery because they were not welcomed at the Ridgemount Church Cemetery located around the corner.¹²

Bertie Hill Settlement

The Bertie Hill Settlement was located in the Bertie Street area going up the hill between Niagara Boulevard and Central Avenue. It was often referred to as "Nigger Hill."¹³ The area was settled by escaped slaves, who likely landed at the foot of Bertie Street, adjacent to the Settlement, where the main ferry landing was located.

Some blacks who lived at Bertie Hill became known and respected. Perhaps the best known was Betsy Robinson, or "Aunt Betsy" who arrived in Fort Erie after escaping slavery in Virginia.¹⁴ John Taylor was one of the first settlers of Bertie Hill. He escaped at Miller's Bay shortly after May 1, 1850.¹⁵ The Bright family was also a well-known local family whose descendants still lived in the area after escaping slavery in the late 1850s.¹⁶ John Bright was said to be the drummer boy at the Battle of Lundy's Lane.

British Methodist Episcopal Church

The predecessor of the British Methodist Episcopal (BME) Church was the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. It had extended itself, as early as 1828, in four centres in Upper Canada including Niagara (on-the-Lake) and Fort Erie.¹⁷ The church for the BME congregation in Fort Erie was not built until the 1870s. It was located at 109 [now 106] Murray St. in Bertie Hill Settlement. Little is known of this early AME group in Fort Erie, except that at a General Conference meeting of the AME in the U.S. it was reported that there were 13 members in Fort Erie. The church served the black community for almost 100 years.

Snake Hill Settlement

"Snake Hill in the 1850s had a considerable Negro colony. One of the slaves to come to Snake Hill was Dan Banks, whose face now adorns the box of a well-known cooked breakfast cereal" [likely referring to Cream of Wheat]. Older residents recall the delicious fried chicken dinners prepared by Negro women in true Southern tradition. At one time colored camp meetings held in the old Snake Hill Grove attracted hundreds of

—Second, Henson also mentions that after arriving, he “heard...of a Mr. Hibbard, who lived some six or seven miles off.” The Hibbard farm is roughly that distance from the foot of Catherine Street.

—Third, Henson mentions that a Col. Warren was on shore when he landed. Probably this man was Colonel John Warren, collector of customs at the port of “Fort Erie Passage since the death of his father, the first collector, in early September 1832.”²¹ In his capacity as collector of customs, Col. Warren attempted to be present at the landing of any craft in order to collect any duties payable, and he would have surely requested vessels arriving from the U.S. to come to his custom house. Thus, the most likely location of Henson’s landing was near the custom house.

—Fourth, Col. Warren’s custom house was located on what is known as the “Old Ferry” wharf, which was located on the Niagara River between Lavinia and Catherine Streets.

—Fifth, Col. Warren had also been granted the lease of the “Ferry below the Rapids at Fort Erie Passage,” which he held for seven-year terms from 1802 until his death in September 1832.²² He operated the ferry out of what became known

Henson had his first house as a free man on the Hibbard farm, an old two-storey of which pigs had broken and made it their resting place.

later as the “Old Ferry” wharf. This was the main ferry from the U.S. side to Fort Erie at the time Henson landed.

—Sixth, there was an illustration of Henson’s landing, often reprinted, which appeared originally in one of the versions of Henson’s autobiography, indicating that Henson landed next to a wharf. If this illustration is accurate, and the wharf illustrated is the Old Ferry wharf, then the landing would have been near the foot of Catherine Street.

Veteran of the siege of Fort Erie

John Baker, who was described as “the last survivor of those who had been slaves with the Loyalists of Upper Canada,”⁴¹ served in the 104th Regiment of Foot at the Siege of Fort Erie.⁴²

Josiah Henson at the Hibbard Farm

After they arrived Josiah began to look for employment, and he heard:

... in the course of the day, of a Mr. Hibbard, who lived some six or seven miles off, and who was a rich man, as riches were counted there, with a large farm, and several small tenements on it, which he was in the habit of letting to his laborers In the afternoon I found him, and soon struck a bargain with him for employment. I asked him if there was any house where he would let me live. He said “Yes”²³

Josiah Henson’s first home was on the Charles Hibbard farm which was located on the west side of Ridgemount Road just north of Bowen Road.²⁴ The St. John’s Anglican Church is located on a portion of the old farm. In some instances the Hibbard farm was said to be located in Ridgeway at the junction of Michener Road and Farr Avenue. That property, however, was owned by Charles Hill from 1805 to 1840 and was purchased by a Chancy Hibbard in 1857, according to Registry records (Instr. # 4753). This Hibbard was a native of Vermont who emigrated to Canada in November 1834, so Henson could not have worked on his farm. Henson and his family remained on the Hibbard farm from 1830 to 1833, then went to the Riselay farm.²⁵

Henson had his first house as a free man on the Hibbard farm. This house was:

... an old two-storey sort of shanty, into the lower storey of which pigs had broken, and had apparently made it their resting-place for some time. Still it was a house and I forthwith expelled the pigs, and set about cleaning it for occupancy The next day I brought the rest of the Hensons to “my house,” and though there was nothing there but bare walls and floors, we were all in a state of great delight, and my wife laughed and acknowledged that it was worth while, and that it was better than a log cabin with an earth-floor. I begged some straw of Mr. Hibbard, and confining it by logs in the corners of the room, I made beds



An Erie Beach Hotel. The first NAACP meeting was held in 1905 at an Erie Beach Hotel. Although no record was made of the name of the hotel, the Fort Erie Hotel at Erie Beach and the Lakeside Inn at Erie Beach both existed at that time. This photo is of the Lakeside Inn.

The Niagara Movement, predecessor of the NAACP, demanded freedom of speech, an unfettered and unsubsidized press, manhood suffrage, and universal common school education.

mention that his family moved, one can assume that his family remained at the Riseley farm until the spring of 1836.³¹

While living on the Riseley farm, Henson "began to reflect, more and more upon the circumstances of the blacks, who were already somewhat numerous in this region."³² Mr. Riseley allowed Henson to:

... call meetings at his house of those who were known to be among the most intelligent and successful of our class. At these meetings we considered and discussed the subject . . . that we would invest our earnings in land, and undertake the task . . . of settling upon wild lands which we could call our own.³³

This concept later became the "Dawn Settlement" in Dresden, Ontario. Evidently these events in Fort Erie and Dresden led to the publishing of Henson's autobiography and indirectly *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which had a strong influence on the abolition of slavery and the Civil War in the U.S.

An Erie Beach Hotel and the NAACP

An Erie Beach hotel was the site of the first meeting of the "Niagara Movement," a predecessor of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). On July 5, 1905, W.E.B. Du Bois invited a "few selected persons" to the secret sessions of the Niagara Move-

ment.³⁴ The meeting was held at an Erie Beach hotel because none of the hotels in Buffalo would accept them.³⁵ "Twenty-nine members of the 'Talented Tenth' participated . . . Many more were expected, but according to rumour, they declined at the last minute after being pressured by white friends of Du Bois' opponent, Booker Washington."³⁶ In this meeting, the Niagara Movement demanded freedom of speech, an unfettered and unsubsidized press, manhood suffrage, and universal common school education.³⁷

"The Niagara men lay[ed] the foundation of the NAACP [and] served as its earliest leaders and staunchest supporters."³⁸ The NAACP formed only five years after the meeting in Fort Erie. Du Bois later became recognized by many people as the founder of Negro sociology and the representative "of the Race's aspiration."³⁹

A hotel at Erie Beach was built before the turn of the century and was located on what is today Waverly Beach.⁴⁰ The Bell telephone directory lists two hotels at Erie Beach in 1906 — the Fort Erie Hotel and the Lakeside Inn.



Coloured Cemetery.

Contrary to the impression the name gives, only one family buried in this cemetery on Curtis Road is documented to be of Negro descent.

Cemeteries Act, Fort Erie had to assume the ownership and maintenance of family cemeteries that were not otherwise looked after. In 1976, a new set of rules and regulations for maintenance and care of cemeteries in Fort Erie was adopted.² Concern was later expressed by the committee, composed only of members of town council, that the Cemetery Committee should include members of Council and/or interested private citizens.

"The Cemetery Committee in its meeting of October 7, 1976 directed the Secretary to prepare the necessary by-law changing the present Committee status to a Cemetery Board to consist of five (5) persons."³ In 1984 the Cemetery Board consisted of seven persons. In 1993, under the Town's department of Parks and Leisure Services, the Cemetery Board became an advisory committee.

The Town of Fort Erie looks after the following cemeteries:

Memorial and Monument Makers

In cemeteries, memorials show respect for the deceased and sometimes memorials are the only public record of a person's life. Carole Hanks' *Early Ontario Gravestones* provides excellent information on this subject and is recommended. She wrote that "Most ordinary citizens would not have been able to afford costly grave markers." Also, "one hundred years ago gravestones were objects of pleasing form and decoration, meant to be enjoyed by the living and, as well, pay respect to the dead."³³ In the Niagara peninsula the white marble markers or, more recently, the granite monuments, were cut by Gadsby, Cornelius, Kirkpatrick & O'Brine, Glenmount Memorials, Rigg Mooney Monuments Ltd. and other stone cutters.

Barnhart / Carver Cemetery

Located on Fox Road between Point Abino Road N. and House Road is a very small family cemetery where five tombstones stand as memorials to members of the Barnhart and Carver families: John Carver and his wife Catharine; Elizabeth, wife of John Barnhart; Magdalene, daughter of Abraham and Magdalene Barnheart; and Sarah E., daughter of Benjamin and Rhodah House.

Benner Cemetery

The Benner Cemetery is located on Gordon Seabrook's property, 3803 Nigh Road. Some of the Benner ancestors are buried here: Jacob Benner died in 1817, and his wife Susanna died in 1822, aged 99 years. Elizabeth and Philip Benner; Mary and Jacob Benner; Christianna, wife of Jacob; Patience, wife of Holley Foster; and Peter Reinhardt, who died in 1884, are among others interred here.

Black Creek Pioneer / Winger / Tunker Cemetery

The Black Creek Pioneer Cemetery is located on College Road, next to the golf course, between Winger and Sider Roads. The cemetery is on a piece of property that John Winger obtained on December 16, 1799.

A memorial states the following: "Sacred to the memory of Bishop John Winger, one of the founders of the River Brethren of the U.S.A. 1787 and founder of the Tunker Church of Canada about the year 1793." Some of the names found on tombstones are Beam, Climenhaga, House, Nigh, Sherk, Sider, Winger and Zimmerman, all of them relatives of the Winger family or members of the Tunker Church.

Coloured Cemetery / The Little Cemetery Around the Corner

Much has been written about this small cemetery located on Curtis Road close to Ridgemount Road. People are under the impression that this cemetery was used to bury coloured people, but in the Ontario Register Thomas B. Wilson wrote "... compare the names of the persons buried in the cemetery with the Bertie census return of 1851 which

makes notations of Negroes and Indians . . . Only one family was found to be Negro and that was the family of Benjamin Russell . . .”⁴ The history of this property has been traced to about 1833; further details are available in “Coloured Cemetery gets plaque” (*Times-Review* June 27, 1992). This article states that family names such as Anger, Huffman, Jansen, Cregar, Scarlett, Stevens and others are seen on the tombstones, but not listed as coloured in the 1851 or 1861 census. Probably many other burials

which he and his wife were buried. It is still used by his descendants.⁵ This cemetery is located on Bertie Road between Burger and Point Abino. Looking at the tombstones here, one may find six generations of the Fretz family and other relatives, such as Huffman, Johnson, Kennedy, Sherk, Winger and Zavitz.

Graham Cemetery

Graham Cemetery is located on the west side of Rosehill Road, north of Nigh Road. Probably the cemetery was established by Richard Graham’s family. A tombstone for Richard Graham, deceased December 15, 1812, and his wife, deceased March 17, 1847, still stands. In 1984 a research of titles showed that the property stayed in the family at least until 1950. Some other surnames are Baxter, Campbell, Chambers, Hodson, Nigh, Plato, Rathvon, Rose and Woolever.

Greenwood Cemetery

The Greenwood Cemetery is situated at the intersection of Thompson and Bowen Roads. The first burial was performed on September 29, 1897, in Section A, Lot 118, where Richard Clark was interred.⁶ Greenwood is one of the larger active cemeteries in Fort Erie.

Haun Cemetery

Haun Cemetery is located on Nelson Haun’s farm along Black Creek,⁷ which is south of Fox Rd. and west of Ott. The William Haun family received a grant of land in 1802, and Mathias Haun received his in 1803.⁸ Some surnames found on the tombstones are Barnhart, Haun and Learn.

Hershey Cemetery

Hershey Cemetery is situated on the east side of Centralia Avenue south of Garrison Road. In March 1857 John B. Hershey and Henry Hershey, trustees for that society called Mennonists, received (in exchange for five shillings) from Abraham C. Hershey one acre of land for the erection of a church for the use of the Society of Mennonists only and also for the purpose of a burial ground for the interment of all Christian denominations.⁹ In 1989 the Town of Fort Erie acquired 75 acres adjacent to the



Harvey Holzworth Collection

St. John’s Anglican Cemetery.
Many pioneers and their descendants rest in this cemetery at St. John’s Church on Ridgemount Road.

were marked with wooden crosses that have disappeared.

Foreman Burial Ground

The Foreman Burial Ground is located on Ernest Benner’s Property, 2530 Bowen Road. Jacob Foreman bought the north half of Lot 9 in Concession 8 from Charles Anger, on August 5, 1820. In a will dated July 12, 1845, Jacob Foreman gave the farm to his two sons, David and John. The will was probated on November 12, 1845. The tombstones of Jacob Foreman (October 11, 1845) and Christina Foreman (1826?), found in this area in the summer of 1984, are evidence that the Foremans were buried on their farm.

Fretz Cemetery

John Fretz settled in Township of Bertie on about 400 acres of land on Lots 2 and 3 on Concessions 15 and 16 on which he built a log house. He laid out on his property a family burying ground, in